Fighting crime — a new tool: Database integrates all N.C. criminal information
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Tri-County law enforcement officers got their first glimpse Tuesday of how a new database might revolutionize the way they keep on top of the criminal element.

The demonstration at Vance-Granville Community College was led by State Controller David McCoy and kicked off the final phase in the statewide roll-out of the Criminal Justice Law Enforcement Automated Data Services, or CJLEADS, that began in 2010.

"We are about the business of rolling out this new tool for law enforcement officers," McCoy said. "By the time we're through, officers will have instant, fully integrated access to 41 million files, and 13 million offenders that North Carolina has information on, all in one shot."

Reps. Jim Crawford, D-Oxford, and Michael Wray, D-Gaston, were on hand to help talk up CJLEADS to the several dozen police, deputies and investigators representing agencies in Vance, Granville, Warren and Franklin counties.

"We kept working on it for probably 10 years in the General Assembly," Crawford said. "This is the fruit of a lot of that work."

Wray added that the work of the law enforcement community stands to be greatly enhanced by how much more information can be shared and accessed faster because of CJLEADS.

"This is a great day for our area, with the technology steadily moving forward — it is the day of the Internet," Wray said.

Officers saw how the database integrates data found within the state's various criminal justice databases, such as warrants, jail, court, prison, probation and parole records, the sex offender registry and DMV information.

The demonstrations included views of the screen-swapping features and how the data is organized for easy viewing, including quick references to potential dangers connected to a

named criminal.

Sondra Phillips, business operations manager for the State Controller's Office, manned the keyboard at the demo to enter data such as offender names, and she demonstrated the speed for data retrieval to a website-like "dashboard" for officers to view.

Links included criminal background details and live DMV web feed, and features include watch and alert capabilities so officers could track named criminal convicts.

McCoy said it took a murder that occurred close to home to illustrate the life-saving capability of a streamlined and comprehensive information database: the March 5, 2008, murder of UNC Student Body President Eve Carson. She was killed by a violent offender with an active probation record, Demario Atwater.

"On March 3, he appeared in Wake County Court, but his records went to the wrong courtroom," McCoy said. "The judge continued the case, (freeing Atwater.) Two days later, Carson was murdered."

The CJLEADS rollout began in Wake County first with a pilot project. It continued with a second phase that starting with the upper and lower Piedmont by late 2010. The intensity of interest prompted McCoy to move up the demonstration schedule to August instead of waiting until December for phase three this year.

McCoy told officers that the ultimate aim is to make communities safe by supporting law enforcement agencies in their mission. He said that the sense of urgency began with state legislators who were motivated to prevent another Atwater from slipping through the information cracks.

"Television crime dramas such as CSI and NCIS in which suspects can be identified and charged in a one-hour show gave many people the mistaken idea that North Carolina's law enforcement and criminal justice professionals had the same kind of cutting edge technology to fight crime," McCoy said.

"The reality, however, was that information about offenders was stored in all types of separate systems that took officers days and sometimes weeks to sort through," he added. "CJLEADS is changing all of that."

A total of $10 million has been spent so far in the program progress, including the big ticket item of training officers, court officials and other contributors and users of the system.

The budget for rollout and training is up to $27 million. Once start-up is achieved statewide, the system will cost about $8 million annually to maintain. McCoy said he opposed to any suggestion that agencies should pay a fee for use.